



CHANGING LIVES THROUGH LITERATURE
AN ALTERNATIVE SENTENCING PROGRAM

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Montana 1948
Submitted by Trudy Schrandt ([profile](#))

Title and Author: *Montana 1948* by Larry Watson
Genre: Novel
Themes: Journey from innocence to awareness; justice and the price it sometimes extracts; collapse of family structure; professional misconduct; unethical behavior; privilege and power
Class Type: Male, different age groups, most with chemical dependency or violence issues

This book is about the horrific events that consumed the summer of 1948 in Bentrock, Montana. The events are seen through the viewpoint of a 12-year-old boy, now 52, who is looking back 40 years to understand how and why his life was shaped the way it was.

An Indian girl from the reservation is the housekeeper (babysitter) for young David. An unfortunate case of pneumonia sets the events of the novel into motion. Her fear of the doctor they summon to treat her opens a Pandora's box into the true character of the doctor, David's uncle and Wesley's brother. His use of his power has allowed him to sexually molest many of the young women on the reservation. In her weakened state and in fear of her life, Marie Little Soldier tells the Hayden family about Uncle Frank's crimes. Wesley, the town sheriff, is forced to consider the ramifications of Frank's actions and what legal measures should be taken.

Wesley discovers that Frank's privilege within the community has sheltered him from the legal ramifications of such a crime. He also discovers that although the family does not sanction this behavior, it has known about it for a long time and just chosen to ignore it or hope that it stops.

This could have been the end, but Frank murders Marie Little Soldier. It could have been a perfect murder, but David has seen Frank leave their home at the time of the murder and knows that his uncle is guilty. His conscience forces him to tell his father, who then must deal with the reality of his own brother's actions.

Hoping to save his family from shame, Wesley incarcerates his brother in their basement. Turning his home into a jail brings on the wrath of the grandfather, first in person and then by proxy, sending hired hands to free him. With the knowledge that his best intentions are not going to work, Wesley makes arrangements to take Frank away from Bentrock and surrender him to another jurisdiction. With his future clear, Frank commits suicide.

David's family becomes outcasts both within the town and within the extended family. They are forced to leave Montana. Although this could be a sad ending, we learn that David and his family are able to redefine themselves and live moral and close-knit lives. David's feeling for the law is reflected in his chosen profession, teaching history. He acknowledges that history does not tell the whole truth.

Approach: I feel that I need to take a close (but short) look at the setting here before we delve into the content and interaction within

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the story. I ask such questions as:

- How is the "harsh life" demonstrated?
- Why is there so much description given to Bentrock and its location?
- What is the importance of the year 1948?
- What promises does the year 1948 hold?
- What is the importance of the Indian reservation?

I spend time comparing Wesley and Frank. This would be a classic subject for a compare and contrast paper in the classroom. The class wants to see these brothers as different, yet they are similar as well. I spend time pointing this out, using discussion points that make the concept of "family" easier to discuss in terms of:

- how members interact
- how some members are duplications of the core family
- how some members establish their own persona, both from within, as well as from outside the core family
- how, regardless of differences in personalities, beliefs, etc., there is a binding force to the family structure
- how families grow together, apart, and renew/redefine themselves

Some of the questions that I ask when comparing the brothers include:

- How do their descriptions differ? How are the symbols specific to 1948?
- Why is David more disappointed in his father than in Frank?
- Both Frank and Wesley hold the Indians in low regard. What is the difference in their attitudes?
- This is a wonderful discussion of prejudice and its varying degrees. How?
- Frank's suicide is a selfish act. Wesley's handling of Frank's crime is a selfless act. What is the distinction?
- Who paid the highest price, Frank or Wesley?

By now, the class can usually become vested in what is "right" and "wrong." We discuss that doing what is right is not always the easy road and that doing wrong is often times rewarded instead of being punished, especially within the setting of prejudice or peer approval. We discuss that, oftentimes, memories of long-standing indiscretions grow in our minds and become large enough that our guilt becomes an issue, for us, for our family, and/or for the law.

I then bring in Julian and his role as family patriarch and law man:

- What is the initial impression of this man?
- What are his connections to the Wild West?
- What are his reactions to Wesley's life style and Frank's crimes?
- What does Julian feel being a police officer means?
- What is Wesley's definition of a law man?
- What are Julian's reactions to Frank's crime(s)?

Gail is a very strong woman in the novel. I like to focus on why she is worried for David. After our discussion about Wesley, Frank, and Julian, her fears cry out to the class. Our discussion focuses on values and why she is worried about his soul. Again, that contrast between Frank and Wesley helps us to understand her worries and realize how they truly are valid.

The law is certainly on trial here, and we discuss justice and the price paid by all for justice to be served.

David is crucial to this novel, and it seems as if he should be discussed first. However, if you can hold off class discussion of this character for a bit, he will be much easier to define.

I discuss his relationships with Marie Little Soldier and with his family. We talk about the difference between the two relationships and the question of truth and validation.

David is the quintessential innocent journeying into the realm of knowledge. We discuss his desire to be "talked to" and to be "included" and what this means to the story. He is experiencing the coming of age mentally, emotionally, and sexually. He feels gratitude towards his uncle for taking care of the situation, rather than sorrow at his suicide.

The questions become larger than life:

- When do you have to speak out against evil?
- Does justice mean jeopardizing your family and future?
- Does power and influence wash you of your crime?
- Is justice larger than family?
- Why did David's family survive while the extended family seem to self-destruct?
- Why is the past a foreign country where things are done differently?

With this last question we can close the evening with discussion about why we have a difficult time looking at our pasts from an objective viewpoint. This can apply to our families, but it can also apply to our actions. When we have some sort of psychological need to "forget events" or "change their focus" we have to ask why. Sometimes this "why" is the reason we often find ourselves in the troubles we do. Other times, it is our way of surviving (as David did).

If there is time, I ask a final question if it has not already raised its head.

How is this novel about privilege and power?

How have you been affected by this?

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